

Rebuilding Northern Uganda

How often do spirited missionaries and peacemakers attempt to offer their service in 3rd world countries by doing things their own way? How many weeklong mission trips raise thousands of dollars to construct one new house or one fence while ignoring the local craftsmen and architects who could give them a better sense of what the community really needs? How long do we spend exploring the local culture of these impoverished places to not only give that culture the dignity it deserves, but to much better understand how we *should* be helping these people back onto their feet with chins held high?

Just as an architect can comprehend buildings more thoroughly by carefully sketching the fine details instead of snapping a photograph, so can a sociologist understand a culture more completely by observing all the fine details down to the humblest beggar on the street corner. With the study of architecture and social trends so similar in this regard, it seems only appropriate that they be combined. Simultaneous study of social trends and the architecture that surrounds them has proven to be a powerful tool for restoring pride and self-sufficiency to those exiled from their culture by war and poverty. *Knowing how* to serve the poor is the first step towards actually doing so.

The people of Northern Uganda are struggling to rebuild their lives, which have been devastated by nearly 20 years of civil war. As with almost every other war or natural disaster in history, architects are being given the opportunity to rebuild the community in whatever fashion they see appropriate. The nation of the Acoli people in Northern Uganda was born of the land and had once been the food-basket of all Uganda. They don't see a *tabula rasa* where their destroyed communities used to be. Rather, they desire to return to the way their lives were before the war. The question then becomes: how do architects help the people of a community develop, while remaining respectful to their traditions and history? The answer comes when one learns their language, dances their dances, and shares their stories. One mustn't simply sketch the most elaborate of houses, but also the humblest of mud huts, where nearly every Acoli man or woman traces their origins. Combining architecture and sociology is not just appropriate, but in fact is the *only* appropriate way to serve the people of

Northern Uganda. True peacemakers can no longer disregard this when they offer their charity.

The original goal of my research was to investigate how architecture was being practiced in the Internally Displaced People (IDP) Camps of Northern Uganda. I hoped to witness work being done by charitable organizations, as well as local grass roots movements, in order to improve life for the IDPs. Upon first arriving, I was pleased to hear that nearly two thirds of all IDPs had managed to move out of the camps and back to their home villages. This, however, left me confused about where to take my research, since architectural practice seemed unnecessary in the deserted camps. Through several interviews with employees of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), I was introduced to the difficulties inherent in the return process for IDPs, and what measures were being taken to ensure security—through paving and maintenance of roads, repairing of wells and boreholes, and reconstruction of destroyed classrooms. I also learned about the situations for those still exiled in the camps, those Extremely Vulnerable Individuals (EVIs) whose circumstances have left them without the capacity to return home on their own. Like the kid picked last during gym class, though, I was struggling to find a way for an architecture perspective to weave itself into the game. With so much work being done to improve infrastructure, it didn't seem that the war-torn areas of Northern Uganda were ready for an architect.

In the Acoli language, the words “design” and “plan” (at least in their architectural connotations) don't exist. Large urban centers have never been a part of Acoli culture (The demographic of Gulu town is mostly foreigners), which leads to confusion about the need for physical planning. Houses in rural villages were typically constructed in neat circles surrounding a central firepit, and new huts were built only as families grew. Small trading centers didn't require much planning, since they usually just mushroomed along highways. It was during the war, when trading centers became IDP camps and swelled well beyond capacity, that people began to realize the importance of planning for the prevention of fires and the distribution of resources (In the case of Pabo, in Amuru District, the population grew from 3,080 people to 63,000 over the course of the war).

The camps had no prior planning whatsoever. In the chaos of fleeing their villages, nobody was given direction about where to build a home. Families that had always lived together were separated by the chaos—their particular rules and customs lost in the mix. Whole generations then grew up in this environment. When

the war ended, in 2006 and 2007, people further began to realize the importance of planning for quelling disputes over land ownership and preparing their towns for future growth. Young adults were returning to lands that they couldn't remember, and if any elders had died, the exact location of the family's land became difficult to locate. This has led to disputes unprecedented in Northern Uganda's history. Also, trading centers that played host to IDPs aren't likely to return to their original size, necessitating serious development in order to sustain the population. It was after an interview with the District Physical Planner and subsequently with members of NGOs, like the Northern Ugandan Transition Initiative (NUTI), that I discovered how the nation was addressing this.

The Gulu District Physical Planning Office experimented in a town called Opit—located on the border between two sub-counties, and where the seat of the local government was to be constructed. They first sensitized the local people to the importance of creating development plans. After 20 years of war, and seeing the chaos that ensued when their town became an IDP camp, the people of Opit were very aware of the plans' implications. The office proceeded to survey every aspect of the town, speaking to all people—from sub-county chiefs to simple villagers—and managed to produce 4 unique plans. These plans featured roundabouts and innovative courtyards appreciative of traditionally concentric Acoli housing. They also included parks, community centers, and beautiful shop fronts that brought Opit to life. The community received the plans so positively that they couldn't eliminate any of them. The planners had paid attention to detail and shown reverence to culture while still developing the town to meet the 21st century. News of the overwhelming success in Opit inspired a wave of new planning for growing towns and former IDP camps in Gulu, Amuru, and Kitgum Districts.

One example of this comes from Makerere University architecture students. They spent several weeks surveying the towns of Namokora and Kitgum Matibi in Kitgum District in order to create new master plans. They interviewed villagers and chiefs, as well as government officials and district planners. The plans (which are currently being drawn), in order to fit with the local society, strongly emphasize agriculture (agro-culture) and the marketplace. With a curvilinear layout, they introduce focal points, and by using clustered settlements, they remain true to traditional Acoli planning.

The Physical Planning office also showed me how 11 towns in Gulu District had gained the status of “Sub-County Headquarters,” and were in need of new development plans. All of these towns had once played host to thousands of IDPs, and many of these IDPs have settled permanently—constructing businesses and integrating into the town structure. With this new “sub-county HQ” status, there will be a natural influx of services that attract commerce and population growth—such as wider roads, amenities like hotels and restaurants, teachers’ housing for the schools, and larger facilities for health centers. With a larger population in a developing town, there are needs for even more services, like taxi/bus parks, community centers, movie theaters, recreational areas, etc. Perhaps the single most important development though, after the school and health center, would be a permanent marketplace. Even after spending years in a near-urban environment, the Acoli people are returning to their land and beginning to grow again. The most sustainable way for them to recover (economically, spiritually, culturally, etc.) is for them to return to their most important activity, agriculture. Although a drought is currently plaguing the North, when it subsides, the people are going to need a venue to restore their agro-economy. This is where the marketplace has such a crucial role.

Towards the very end of my stay, I had the good fortune of spending the night under a grass-thatch roof in the town of Awach in Gulu District. I’ve been assigned the task of designing a new marketplace (and most likely a new taxi/bus park too) for the community, which will be presented in May to fulfill the requirements for my senior design thesis. Sickness and a land dispute cut my time in Awach short. I was still able to spend two full days, though, surveying the sight (using local methods I learned in Western Uganda), sketching various aspects of the town, and interviewing several of the locals about their circumstances and expectations for the marketplace. I will incorporate all this data into my final design.

Hassan Fathy, while designing a new village for the impoverished tomb robbers of Egypt’s Valley of the Kings, stated:

“The people who are to transform the countryside will not be able to do it by large directives issued from office desks in Cairo; they will have to love the fellah enough to live with him, to make their homes in the country, and to devote their lives to practical work, on the spot, toward the improvement of rural life.”¹

Fathy in the 1930s already knew that a human understanding was necessary to architecture. Planning and development shouldn’t ever be devoid of the human culture that exists within them. His lessons can certainly be

¹Fathy, Hassan. Architecture for the Poor. University of Chicago Press. Chicago, IL. 1973.

taught in the northern regions of Uganda, where a post-war revitalization has the ability to support the culture of the Acoli people into the 21st Century. My 9 weeks in Gulu and surrounding areas helped me understand this incredible opportunity for both architects and developers. Rarely anymore are architects given the chance to design for a specific culture—one that has its own language, dances, and oral tradition. Even rarer are architects from the United States given the opportunity to explore a culture carefully enough to design something appropriate for this purpose. Having been given this opportunity, I hope to pave the way for future developers to create a modern “Ugandan architecture” that is both traditional and replicable for impoverished communities.

Thank you once again for all your support.

Kuc ki Rubanga gibed kedi (Peace and God bless).